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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the use of six nonstandard linguistic variables by eight adolescent and eight adult African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), each group equally divided into males and females, from Muncie, Indiana. The study was designed to investigate whether occupation, a social variable, also determines AAVE speakers' use of nonstandard linguistic features, and whether AAVE adolescents behave differently. Results do not indicate a significant difference between AAVE male and female adults in use of these nonstandard linguistic variables, which does not strongly support the findings of precious research that men tend to use nonstandard variables more frequently because men are recognized socially by their occupation instead of their speech. AAVE adolescents, not having occupation as a social variable, do not show significant difference either, except for one variable, conforming to linguistic behavior of their adult counterparts. Findings suggest that the social variable, occupation, does not play a significant role in this population. Contains 31 references. (Author/MSE)

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Gender Differences in Use of Nonstandard Linguistic Variables between Male and Female African-American Adolescents and Adults in America's "Middletown"

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Gender Difference in Use of Nonstandard Linguistic Variables between Male and Female African-American Adolescents and Adults in America's "Middletown"

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Abstract Few studies on gender difference in use of nonstandard linguistic variables have involved African-American Vernacular (AAVE) speakers, especially adolescents who do not have a full-time employment as a social variable to demonstrate their socioeconomic status. This paper reports a study on use of six nonstandard linguistic variables by eight AAVE adolescents and eight adults, equally divided into males and females, from Muncie, Indiana, U.S., in order to investigate whether occupation, a social variable, also determines AAVE speakers' use of nonstandard linguistic variables and whether AAVE adolescents behave differently. This study has not found significant difference between AAVE male and female adults in the use of these nonstandard linguistic variables, which does not strongly support the findings from the previous studies that men tend to use nonstandard linguistic variables more frequently than women do because men are recognized socially by their occupation instead of their speech. AAVE adolescents, not having occupation as a social variable, do not show significant difference, either, except for one variable, conforming to the linguistic behavior of their adult counterparts. The findings suggest that the social variable, occupation, does not play a significant role in the use of nonstandard linguistic variables by AAVE speakers, at least in Muncie, Indiana.

1. Introduction. Numerous studies (e.g., Cheshire 1982; L. Milroy 1982, 1988; Schatz 1986; Trudgill 1974, 1983) in the 1980s investigated use of linguistic variables between male and

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female speakers. The researchers concluded that, given the same socioeconomic status, male speakers use nonstandard linguistic variables more frequently than female subjects. One of the main reasons offered for this discrepancy is that men are recognized socially by what they do (i.e., by their occupations) and women by how they appear (i.e., by what they say). However, few of these studies involved African-American speakers (Bailey and Bassett 1986), especially adolescents. Since adolescents do not generally have a full-time employment to demonstrate their socioeconomic status, it is worth investigating whether their use of linguistic variables matches that found among adult speakers.

This study reports the findings from a study on the use of nonstandard linguistic variables in the speech of African-American adolescents as well as adults in Muncie, Indiana. Specifically, this study focuses on the six syntactic variables unique only to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). The study tried to determine whether the findings of AAVE adults from this study confirm to those found in previous studies; whether AAVE adolescents share the same linguistic patterns as their AAVE adult counterparts; and whether there are significant differences in the use of nonstandard linguistic variables between male and female adolescents.

2. Design of the Study. Muncie, Indiana, has been known as America's "Middletown" since Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937) did their pioneering socioeconomic community study in the United States some sixty years ago. The present population is some 71,000; 6,800 of whom, about ten percent, are African-Americans.

Eight African-American adolescents, aged 17-20, and eight adults, aged about 50-85, equally divided into males and females with both groups were involved in this study. They were randomly chosen and were all from a blue-collar family background. The speech samples were

over 45 minutes long, collected in casual conversations at either the subject's home or where they socialized with other people. All but one of the eight adolescents were in their senior year in high school and none of them had a permanent job. One female adolescent had worked as a clerk at a community center for just two months. The eight adults all had or had had a permanent job. The biographical information on the subjects is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Biographical Information on the Adolescents (N = 8)

Subject	Sex	Age	Years in Muncie	Education	Occupation	Origin
1	M	17	17	11	n/a	IN
2	M	19	19	13	n/a	IN
3	M	17	17	12	n/a	IN
4	M	17	17	11	n/a	IN
5	F	18	18	12	n/a	IN
6	F	18	18	12	n/a	IN
7	F	20	18	12	clerk	IN
8	F	19	16	12	n/a	IN

Table 2. Biographical Information on the Adults (N = 8)

Subject	Sex	Age	Years in Muncie	Education	Occupation	Origin
1	M	67	67	13	Worker	IN
2	M	75	75	10	Worker	IN
3	M	71	66	12	Worker	IN
4	M	44	48	12	Police	IN
5	F	69	48	12	Bank Clerk	AK
6	F	85	68	12	Homemaker	IN
7	F	70	70	12	Shop Clerk	IN
8	F	68	68	18	Teacher	IN

3. Discussion. Linguists have studied numerous linguistic features in AAVE (e.g., Davis and

Huang 1995; Smitherman 1977); however only eight features, according to Fasold (1981: 167), are unique to AAVE. Six of them are syntactic features: use of invariant *be* not resulting from the absence of *will* or *would*; absence of copula/auxiliary *be*; *been* used to express past action that has recently been completed; absence of plural suffix; absence of possessive suffix; and absence of third person singular suffix. This study focuses on these six syntactic features. We may assume that if female speakers use fewer nonstandard linguistic features than males, as claimed, then female AAVE speakers may have fewer occurrences of these six unique features, because these features are likely to be more stigmatized than other non-standard features of AAVE.

One frequently raised issue in the analysis of linguistic features is the determination of their potential occurrences. According to the accountability principle (Sankoff and Thibault 1980; Weiner and Labov 1983), both the occurrences of a variant and its non-occurrences in the relevant environments should be counted in the analysis of a linguistic feature. However, it is hard, if not impossible, as linguists have noted, to define the potential environments of some syntactic features accurately. Labov (1982:87) points out "there are a number of variables that can be studied now by noting only each occurrence, but not each non-occurrence, since it has not yet been possible to close the possible set of variants." In the following discussion, both potential and actual occurrences of a feature, if possible, are presented. If there is indeterminacy to define the potential occurrence of a feature, only the actual occurrence is provided.

As for the issue of sample number, given the size of the Muncie African-American community, having four subjects each to represent difference in speech due to age and gender was considered sufficient for this study, since Milroy (1987:22) observes that "many surveys have fewer than four speakers in each cell."

3.1 Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*

Invariant ***be*** not resulting from the absence of ***will*** or ***would*** is used to indicate habitual aspect or distributive aspect (Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1974), as in *He always be around here* (Fasold 1981).

Contextual clues are used to distinguish invariant ***be*** with a distributive function from invariant ***be*** resulting from the absence of *will* or *would*. No potential environment for this feature is defined, because of the indeterminacy involved, as Wolfram (1991:1) asks, "Does one then count habitual contexts for non-auxed verbs (e.g., *We do this all the time*) as potential occurrences for habitual ***be***?" Table 3 presents the actual occurrence of invariant ***be*** in the speech of adolescents and adults.

Table 3. Invariant ***Be*** Not Resulting from Absence of ***Will*** or ***Would*** (N = 16)

Subjects	**Invariant *Be***
M. Adolescents	4
F. Adolescents	1
M. Adults	0
F. Adults	1

We can see that there are only six occurrences of this feature: one in the speech of a female adult, one used by a female adolescent, and four used by a male adolescent. Because of the scanty occurrence of this feature and the impossibility of defining its potential environments, no conclusion regarding gender difference in the use of this feature can be made. These occurrences might be due simply to chance.

3.2 Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be*

Much research has been conducted on the absence of copula/auxiliary ***be*** in AAVE (Bailey 1965; Baugh 1980; Fasold 1969; Labov 1969; Steward 1967; and Wolfram 1974). Following Labov's (1969:716-7) and Baugh's (1980) research, this study defines two preceding and six following syntactic environments for this feature as shown in table 4 and 5.

Table 4. Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary ***Be*** According to Two Preceding Environments (N = 16)

	NP		**Pron.**	
Subjects	***Is***	***Are***	***Is***	***Are***
M. Adolescents	10.7 (3/28)	0 (0/2)	1.3 (3/224)	16 (4/25)
F. Adolescents	0 (0/51)	6.3 (1/16)	0 (0/212)	3.7 (2/54)
M. Adults	3.4 (1/29)	0 (0/4)	0 (0/125)	4 (2/49)
F. Adults	0 (0/27)	0 (0/7)	0 (0/121)	6.2 (2/32)

We can see from table 4 that ***be*** is more likely to be absent in two preceding environments in the speech of male subjects, especially adolescents: when **be** is in singular form following a noun phrase and when **be** is plural following a pronoun. As for the female subjects, it is more likely to be absent when it is plural following a pronoun.

Table 5 shows that copula/auxiliary ***be*** is more likely to be absent when it is followed by an NP, an adjective, a locative, or a verb of progressive tense. The male subjects had more absence in these four following environments than did the female subjects. The percentages of the occurrence of this feature are summarized in Table 6. Statistical tests were applied to examine whether there was significant difference in the use of this feature between male and

female adolescents, between male and female adults, between male adolescents and adults, and between female adolescents and adults.

Table 5. Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary ***Be*** According to the Six Following Environments (N = 16)

Subjects	**NP**	**Adj.**	**Loc.**	**V + *ing***	**Gonna**	**Det + NP**	**Misc.**
M. Adolescents	0 (0/76)	3.4 (3/87)	1.7 (1/58)	10.7 (3/28)	50 (2/4)	0 (0/23)	0 (0/26)
F. Adolescents	0 (0/112)	0 (0/98)	3.7 (2/54)	0 (0/39)	0 (0/5)	0 (0/37)	0 (0/37)
M. Adults	0 (0/84)	4.6 (2/43)	0 (0/24)	0 (0/14)	50 (1/2)	0 (0/34)	0 (0/34)
F. Adults	0 (0/43)	1.4 (1/69)	0 (0/18)	8.3 (1/12)	0 (0/0)	0 (0/37)	0 (0/23)

Table 6. Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary ***Be*** (N = 16)

Subjects	**Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be***
M. Adolescents	3.3 (10/303)
F. Adolescents	0.8 (3/383)
M. Adults	1.4 (3/208)
F. Adults	1.1 (2/187)

Table 7 gives the results from these tests which show that one of the comparisons is significant

Several interpretations are available. First, this study did not find significant gender difference in the use of this feature between neither male and female adolescents nor between

male and female adults. Second, this study did not find significant age difference between adolescents and their corresponding adults, either. Since age often associates with employment, it seems that the frequency of the occurrence of **be** absence between male and female subjects is not decisively conditioned by occupation as a social variable.

Table 7. Results of Statistical Tests for Comparisons of Occurrences of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary ***Be***

Comparisons	**T**	**df**	**P**
M. Adolescents vs. F. Adolescents	1.61	6	0.158
M. Adults vs. F. Adults	0.32	6	0.758
M. Adolescents vs. M. Adults	1.17	6	0.287
F. Adolescents vs. F. Adults	-.26	6	0.802

3.3 *Been* Used to Express Past Action That Has Recently Been Completed

AAVE speakers may use *been* instead of *have been*, when expressing a past action that has recently been completed, as in *They been there before* for *They have been there before* (Smitherman 1977:22). However, as Fasold (1981) and Rickford (1975) have observed, the structure of *have been* in White vernacular English is not exactly equivalent in meaning to the use of *been* in AAVE. Because of this discrepancy, it is unlikely to define the potential environment for this feature accurately. Table 8 gives the actual occurrences of this feature.

Only one occurrence of this feature is found, and it occurred in the speech of a male adult. No conclusions can be made because of the very low occurrence and the indeterminacy of its potential environment.

Table 8. Occurrences of ***been*** Used to Express Past Action That Has Recently Been Completed (N = 16)

Subjects	**Occurrences of *Been***
M. Adolescents	0
F. Adolescents	0
M. Adults	1
F. Adults	0

3.4 Absence of Plural Suffix

Previous studies (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1992; Wolfram 1969) show that plural suffix in AAVE tends to be absent less frequently than other syntactic nonstandard features of AAVE.

In order to see in which environment the suffix is more likely to be absent, this study identifies three preceding phonological environments: a preceding vowel, a preceding voiced consonant, or a preceding voiceless consonant. McDavid and McDavid (1964:287) observe that the occurrence of the uninflected plurals of nouns of measure, such as *My husband left me three month ago*, is more related to the historical and geographical distribution of the plurals than to the social distribution, and AAVE speakers do not necessarily use uninflected plurals consistently. As a result, this study excludes the occurrences of uninflected plurals of nouns of measure, such as *I was gone in the service for four years; four years, nine month and twenty-six days to be exact.*Table 9 displays the percentages of the occurrences of this feature in the three preceding phonological environments.

Table 9. Percentages of Plural Suffix Absence in Three Preceding Phonological Environments (N = 16)

Subjects	Vowel	Voiced Consonant	Voiceless Consonant
M. Adolescents	25 (3/12)	4.7 (4/85)	8.2 (4/49)
F. Adolescents	0 (0/27)	2.0 (4/113)	1.6 (1/61)
M. Adults	2.5 (1/39)	3.5 (6/167)	2.5 (1/40)
F. Adults	0 (0/21)	1.5 (2/126)	0 (0/49)

It is obvious that this feature occurred more frequently in the speech of both the male adolescents and adults than corresponding females in each of the three environments. The female adolescents had occurrences in two environments except when the preceding sound is a vowel. The female adults had only one occurrence: when the preceding sound was a voiced consonant.

Table 10. Percentages of Absence of Plural Suffix (N = 16)

Subjects	Absence of Plural Suffix
M. Adolescents	7.5 (11/146)
F. Adolescents	2.5 (5/201)
M. Adults	3.3 (8/243)
F. Adults	1.0 (2/196)

Table 10 displays the overall percentages of plural suffix absence in the speech of the subjects. Although both the male adolescents and adults had more occurrences of plural suffix absence than their respective female counterparts, the difference is not significant ($p = 0.335$ and 0.162

respectively). Table 11 provides the results from the statistical tests. The data also show that this feature occurs rather infrequently in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects, which conforms to the previous findings.

Table 11. Results of Statistical Tests for Absence of Plural Suffix (N = 16)

Comparisons	**T**	**df**	**P**
M. Adolescents vs. F. Adolescents	1.05	6	0.335
M. Adults and F. Adults	1.59	6	0.162
M. Adolescents vs. M. Adults	1.13	6	0.303
F. Adolescents vs. F. Adults	1.71	6	0.138

3.5 Absence of Possessive Suffix

Linguists have dealt with this feature from different perspectives. Some have studied it simply as an AAVE syntactic feature (Ash and Myhill 1986; Labov et al. 1968, Labov and Harris 1986); whereas others have studied it in regard to style (Baugh 1979; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1991). Nevertheless, they all agree that AAVE speakers generally do not use possessive suffix when conveying the concept of possession. In AAVE, according to Wolfram and Fasold (1974:173), "possession is indicated by the order of the words."

The data show that this feature did not occur in the speech of either the male or female subjects in this study, although there were potential occurrences. Table 12 provides the potential occurrences of this feature in the speech of the subjects.

Table 12. Potential Occurrences of Absence of Possessive Suffix (N = 16)

Subjects	**Absence of Possessive Suffix**
M. Adolescents	0 (0/7)
F. Adolescents	0 (0/5)
M. Adults	0 (0/12)
F. Adults	0 (0/13)

3.6 Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the absence of third person singular suffix in the speech of AAVE speakers (e.g., Ash and Myhill 1986; Baugh 1979; Fasold 1978; Labov et al. 1968, 1983; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1991; and Wolfram 1969). Because of the high rate of third person singular suffix absence in AAVE, Labov et al. (1968:164) claim that "there is no underlying third singular -s" in AAVE.

This study examines four environments of the occurrence of this feature: (1) lexical verbs used without third person singular suffix, such as *work* or *look*; (2) auxiliary verbs *have* or *haven't* used instead of *has* or *hasn't*; (3) auxiliary verbs *do* or *don't* used instead of *does* or *doesn't*; and (4) verbs without third person singular suffix used in the historical present in a narrative. Since it is not always possible to determine when a speaker intends to use a verb in the historical present, only the actual occurrences of third person singular suffix are counted in this environment. Three environments are excluded: when speakers quoted from books; when third person singular suffix was attached to either first person pronouns or nouns in plural forms, as in *I has the most homework in...*; and when the syntactic structure of *done* + verb was involved.

Table 13 displays the percentages of the occurrence of this feature in the four environments.

Table 13. Percentages of Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix in Four Verbal Environments (N = 16)

Subjects	**Lexical Verb**	***Have/Haven't***	***Do/Don't***	**Historical**
M. Adolescents	32.3 (22/68)	0 (0/7)	75 (6/8)	(-)
F. Adolescents	9.2 (7/76)	0 (0/5)	0 (0/8)	(-)
M. Adults	2.3 (1/43)	0 (0/1)	(0/1)	(-)
F. Adults	29.2 (5/54)	0 (0/2)	33.3 (1/3)	(-)

We can see that none of the four groups exhibited any absence of third person singular suffix in the environment of *have/haven't*. Besides, this feature seems more likely to occur in the environment of *do/don't* than that of lexical verbs, especially for the male adolescents. This finding supports Wolfram and Fasold's (1974:155) claim that "The form *don't*, as in *He don't walk*, seems to promote *-s* absence more than other verbs."

Table 14. Percentages of Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix (N = 16)

Subjects	**Absence of Third Person Singular**
M. Adolescents	33.7 (28/83)
F. Adolescents	7.8 (7/89)
M. Adults	2.2 (1/45)
F. Adults	10.1 (6/59)

Table 14 provides the overall percentages of third person singular suffix absence. We can see

from table 14 that the male adolescents had more occurrence of this feature than any other groups. The results from the statistical tests, displayed in table 15, show that the difference in the use of this feature between the male and female adolescents is significant (p = .034), as is the difference between the male adolescents and adults (p = .036). However, the difference between male and female adults is not significant (p = .225).

Table 15. Results of Statistical Tests for Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix (N = 16)

Comparisons	**T**	**df**	**P Values**
M. Adolescents vs. F. Adolescents	2.73	6	0.034
M. Adults vs. F. Adults	-1.51	3.11*	0.225
M. Adolescents vs. M. Adults	3.54	3.14*	0.036
F. Adolescents vs. F. Adults	-0.97	3.99*	0.389

* tests based on unequal variance.

It seems that the adults and the female adolescents are more sensitive to this feature than male adolescents, who had the most occurrences. It also shows that, contrary to the previous findings, occupation seems not to play a significant role in the use of this feature between the male and female adults since the male adults did not have more occurrences of this feature than their corresponding females.

4. Summary. This study has examined six non-standard syntactic features which are unique to AAVE (Fasold 1981) in order to find out if the male and female adolescents in Muncie, Indiana, used these features differently in frequency, given the unavailability of permanent occupation as a social variable.

The feature ***been*** used to express past action that has been recently completed, whose potential environments cannot be defined, did not occur in the speech of either the male or the female adolescents. There was only one occurrence in the speech of male adults and none in that of female adults. Another feature, ***be*** used not resulting from the absence of ***will*** or ***would***, whose potential environments cannot be defined either, occurred rather infrequently: four in the speech of male adolescents and one in that of female adolescents. There was only one occurrence among female adults and none among male adults. Because of their scanty occurrence, no conclusions about gender difference in the use of these features are drawn.

As for the four features whose potential environments can be defined, the possessive suffix was not absent from the speech of either adolescents or adults. Copula/auxiliary ***be*** and plural suffix were absent more frequently from the speech of both male adolescents and adults than from that of their female counterparts, but the difference is not significant respectively. Only one feature, absence of third person singular suffix, shows significant difference in the occurrence between the male and female adolescents, but not significant between the male and female adults. The findings here cannot strongly support the gender pattern of using non-standard linguistic forms found by the previous studies, such as that men use non-standard linguistic variables more frequently than women do.

The study shows that the male adolescents were also as much sensitive to most of the non-standard features unique to AAVE as much as were the female adolescents, even though, according to the previous studies, women are more likely to be expected to speak in ways considered polite and refined by society. This male sensitivity to non-standard features also appears in the findings that there was no significant difference in use of any of these features

between male and female adults. As for the significant difference between male and female adolescents' occurrences of the absence of third person singular suffix, one explanation may be that this feature is not as stigmatized as the rest of the unique AAVE features, since almost all of the subjects, regardless of gender and age, had a higher rate of occurrence of this feature than that of any other features. Another explanation may be that retaining third person singular suffix in one's speech may be the least indicative of refinement--a display of cultural value--expected typically in women's speech. This may explain why the female subjects, regardless of age, also had a higher rate of this feature than that of the other features.

In addition, the results of this study suggest that there may be a possible hierarchical ordering of the uniqueness of these six non-standard syntactic features in the speech of AAVE speakers. It seems that ***been*** used to express past action that has recently been completed and the absence of possessive suffix tend to be the most salient or stigmatized since the occurrence of these two features is either none or very low in each of the groups. Absence of third singular suffix is the least unique since both the male and female subjects had the highest rate of occurrence than that of other features. The other four features are in between.

This study has not found significant difference between AAVE male and female adult subjects in the use of six nonstandard linguistic variables, which does not strongly support the findings from the previous studies that men tend to use nonstandard linguistic variables more frequently in their speech than women do because men use their occupation, not their speech to show their social status. AAVE adolescents, not influenced by occupation as a social variable, conform to the linguistic behavior of their adult counterparts except for one variable. The findings from this study suggests that the social variable, occupation, does not play a significant

role in the use of nonstandard linguistic variables in Muncie AAVE adolescents and adults.

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